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Immense Damage Seen From Ex-C.I.A. Employee

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WASHINGTON, Aug. 7 — Edward L. Howard, the former Central Intelligence Agency employee who reportedly defected to the Soviet Union, has done immeasurable damage to national security by disclosing what he knows about American intelligence operations and personnel, Government officials said today.

Since the night in September when he abandoned his family and fled into the New Mexico desert, American intelligence officials have feared that Mr. Howard would someday reappear in the Soviet Union, ready to reveal the techniques of American spying against the Soviet Union and its allies.

"Certainly if a C.I.A. agent defects to the Soviet Union, it damages us," said Senator Patrick J. Leahy, a Vermont Democrat and deputy chairman of the Select Committee on Intelligence. "It's a serious matter. It's a matter of concern to all of us."

Reportedly Failed Lie Test

Administration officials have reported previously that Mr. Howard might have helped the Soviet Union apprehend Soviet citizens who spied for the United States, including a Soviet military researcher who has disappeared and may have been executed.

Intelligence officials said today that Mr. Howard, whose career ended abruptly in 1983 when he reportedly failed a lie detector test, was the first C.I.A. employee to defect to the Soviet Union in the agency's 39-year history.

In the 1960's at least three employees of another intelligence-gathering agency, the National Security Agency, requested asylum in the Soviet Union.

At a news conference in the Capitol, Senator Leahy said he expected Soviet officials would be "relentless" in questioning Mr. Howard about his knowledge of C.I.A. operations and staff. He said he suspected that an agreement between Mr. Howard and Soviet agents required that "he will give them everything."

Puzzled by His Motives

Before he left the C.I.A., officials said, the agency planned to assign Mr. Howard to Moscow, and he had been briefed on American intelligence gathering in the Soviet capital.

Senator Leahy declined today to discuss many details of the case, saying public statements about Mr. Howard and the information he might have provided to Soviet officials would only aid the Soviet Union.

The Senator said he was still puzzled by Mr. Howard's motives in defecting. "I don't know what motivates somebody to sell out their country," he said.

Other officials said they believed that Mr. Howard's decision to become a Soviet spy was motivated by a desire for revenge against the C.I.A.

He was forced to resign from the agency in 1983 after a polygraph, or lie detector test, indicated that he had used drugs and engaged in petty theft.

The Howard case has prompted broad reviews by the C.I.A. and the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Mr. Howard disappeared last year from his home in New Mexico while under surveillance by the F.B.I., officials said.

"Both the C.I.A. and the F.B.I. realize there were problems with the handling of the case," Senator Leahy said. "There were mistakes all around."

Missing Researcher Cited

He said he did not know the path followed by Mr. Howard in traveling from New Mexico to the Soviet Union. There were indications, one official said, that he had somehow managed to get to Finland and then crossed into the Soviet Union.

According to Administration sources, Mr. Howard helped the Soviet authorities arrest the military re-

searcher, A. G. Tolkachev, on spying charges. One source here said Mr. Tolkachev had disappeared.

The source said Mr. Tolkachev had worked on developing electronics systems for military aircraft, including radar sets and other "countermeasures" for deceiving enemy radar. Last September, the Soviet Union announced that Mr. Tolkachev had been caught with miniature spy cameras and two-way radios.

Officials have said Mr. Howard's activities had been exposed by Vitaly S. Yurchenko, the Soviet intelligence agent who defected to the United States last year but later decided to return to Moscow.

Mr. Howard, who is 34 years old, worked most recently as a financial forecaster for the State of New Mexico. To his friends, he was a bit laconic, perhaps, but smart.

Last fall, after inquiries by the F.B.I., Mr. Howard quietly walked away from his job in New Mexico, leaving his office key in an envelope and a note of resignation that cited "personal reasons." He asked that his severance pay be sent to his wife and 2-year-old son.

Mr. Howard, whose father served in the Air Force, graduated from high school in England and then returned to the United States, graduating from the University of Texas. He later worked for the Agency for International Development in Peru as a loan officer in project development.

Joined C.I.A. in 1981

In 1981, he joined the Central Intelligence Agency, where, the F.B.I. said, he had access to "highly classified information concerning United States intelligence matters."

In court papers, the bureau maintained that Mr. Howard had been paid by the Soviet Union to provide classified information "relating to United States intelligence sources and methods."

Court papers said he traveled to Austria in 1984 and sold highly sensitive information to Soviet agents.

His work for the Soviet Union had apparently begun earlier. The F.B.I. said that in 1983, Mr. Howard spent hours loitering near the Soviet Embassy in Washington, trying to decide whether to become a Soviet spy.

After his humiliating departure from the C.I.A., Mr. Howard made up a story about his years in Washington, telling friends that he had worked for the State Department but that he had resigned because the department wanted to send him to Moscow and he did not want to go.